

English in Japan

Aideen E. Brody

Since coming to Japan ten years ago, I have been interested in the way English is used and the way it is taught in this country. There are various problems with both the usage and the learning of English. In this short article, some of these problems are discussed.

“Japlish” or Japanese-English

In varying ways, a great deal of English is used in Japanese. With the increasing importance of English as an international language, Japanese borrowings from English also increased. This turned into a flood following the Second World War, until today the use of English words is so widespread that a bemused foreigner might be forgiven for thinking that all he has to do to make himself understood in Japan is to speak English according to Japanese rules of pronunciation! Native English speakers are “bewitched, bothered, and bewildered” by the use (or mis-use) of their language. Their criticisms are sometimes met with by statements to the effect that the English used within the Japanese language is for the Japanese people only. This implies that once a foreign word has been adopted into Japanese, it ceases to be foreign, and speakers of the language from whence it came need not concern themselves with what happens to it. Undoubtedly, the vast majority of English speakers around the world are totally unconcerned about what happens to an English word when it enters the Japanese language. However, the case is somewhat different for those who are involved in the teaching of English in Japan. Also, since *gairaigo* is occasionally incomprehensible even to Japanese, one inevitably wonders why so much of it is used, often so unnecessarily.

Children in Japan are exposed to the English language at a very early age. For example, there are all the advertising slogans used in television commercials, on billboards, in magazines, and on various products. (If you didn’t know, could you ever guess that phrases such as “For Beautiful Human Life,” “Lion Between Teeth,” and “The best brand of high quality,” refer, respectively, to cosmetics, toothpaste, and chocolate?) Product or brand names are frequently in (sometimes questionable) English (the ‘Bluebird’ car, ‘Hope’ cigarettes, ‘Pocari Sweat’ soft drink). Most pro-

professional baseball teams have English names (Giants, Swallows, Tigers, Whales, etc.). Many words from English have entered the general vocabulary (e.g., pen, camera, cap, lemon, cabbage, piano, radio, taxi, bus, table, etc.). While many words from English are used with no more than a slight change in pronunciation or accentuation, some strange things have happened to other words. Often the original word is shortened, as in *terebi* for *television*, *infure* for *inflation*, *suto* for *strike*, *zenesuto* for *general strike*, *puro* for *professional*. Sometimes a new word comes out of the borrowed English word. For example, the word *naita* (*nighter*) means a baseball game played at night. In a few cases both languages will be used within the one word, which can be really confusing, e.g., *demotai*, meaning *demonstrators*. Total borrowings number in the tens of thousands.

On reaching first year junior high school, where English is first taught as a compulsory subject, students are frequently surprised to find that they have actually been using words of English origin. Not having given any thought to the matter, they have accepted them as being part of the Japanese language. When trying to teach students the original English words, however, the teacher has an uphill task. It is, for example, very difficult to erase the pronunciation *orénji* for the word *orange* among students accustomed to their own way of pronouncing it. It is often easier to teach the correct pronunciation of much more difficult words than *orange*, as long as they don't exist in kana form in Japanese.

Generally speaking, the widespread borrowing of and from English causes little distress to any but native English speakers. To the Japanese, it is purely practical. It enables an easy distinction to be made between foreign objects or ideas, and Japanese ones. In the business world, products sell better if they have a foreign name. Apparently no one seems to feel that the Japanese language is debased in any way.

Formal Study of the English Language

Apart from the use of English within the Japanese language, the pursuit of mastering English (as a second language) is intriguing to the foreigner. The amount of time, effort, and sometimes money, spent on this pursuit is truly prodigious. All too often, however, the results do not justify this great expenditure. Admittedly English and Japanese are very different languages. Acquiring fluency in both is very difficult. But with all the exposure to English in this country, one might expect better results.

Personally, I would like to see a more flexible approach to the foreign language teaching in schools here. The educational system in Japan emphasizes uniformity to the point of being monotonous. Students all over the country are learning approximately the same thing in the same way at the same time so that they can take the same type of examinations. However, not all students have the same abilities or requirements. Large numbers of students who have no notion of using English in their future lives are, nevertheless, compelled to study it until they graduate from senior high school, at roughly the same level, or using the same material, as those who plan to go on to university. Students in the former group inevitably become bored and restless, causing trouble all around – to themselves, to more serious students, and to their teachers. It would be better to offer such students what might be called an “English for fun” course, which could include, for instance, language games, films, or videotape material.

Offering students a chance to learn a language other than English would be an interesting addition to a school curriculum. A logical choice here would be Chinese, which is closer to Japanese than English is. Moreover, it is the language of a country which, in terms of distance and expenditure, is easier to visit than any English-speaking country.

Learning a foreign language is not something that can be achieved overnight. It requires much time, much study, and above all, much practice – practice in speaking and in using what has been learned. This is especially true in the early stages, for instance, the junior high school level. At present, however, students at this level receive no more than three hours of English instruction per week. This is barely enough time for studying the prescribed curriculum. It gives little opportunity for the practice, let alone the enjoyment, of what is being studied. Unfortunately, this results in frustration leading to apathy for too many students. The casual borrowing from English mentioned in the first part of this article, does little to help a student cope with the formal study of the English language. Many soon start to lag behind. Great pressure is placed on the teachers, who must struggle to try and bring their large classes (often numbering forty to fifty students) up to a certain minimum level of English competence in order to pass the entrance examination for senior high school. In fact, the constant stress on examinations must bear a large part of the responsibility for students' lack of fluency in speaking English. By the time they have tried to prepare for all the mid-term tests, end-of-term tests, achievement tests, proficiency tests, not to mention high school and university entrance examinations, they really have no time left for learning to

speak English! Once they reach junior college or university level, most students have become inhibited, tongue-tied, and embarrassed about actually using any of the English which theoretically they know quite well. This gives rise to the frequently heard lament "We spend so many years learning English, but we still can't speak it." One major problem lies in the shortage of people to speak to; to practise a language, you must have somebody to converse with. If everybody around you speaks Japanese, then it is obvious that you are not going to improve your fluency in speaking English! On the other hand, there is no magic that will turn a student into a fluent speaker just because he or she happens to know or receive lessons from a native of an English-speaking country. The effort must come from the student.

Conclusion

The indiscriminate use of English in Japan does not enhance the Japanese language, and neither does it help those who are seriously studying it. As regards the teaching of English, it should be kept in mind that not all students have the same requirements. Some are more interested in the spoken language, others are more interested in the written language - and many are interested in neither. Greater flexibility in the teaching programmes, with more consideration given to the students' actual needs, might yield better results.